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Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication
Session 2 - Communication crises - issue and reputation management

Preliminary thoughts on issue and crisis communications from the HLG-MOS Strategic Communication Project

Note by the High-level Group for Modernization of Official Statistics

Summary

The document presents the initial thinking on issue and crisis communications based on a project on strategic communications that is carried out in 2018 under the High-level Group for Modernization of Official Statistics. Effective issue and crisis management is critical to protect and maintain the reputation of a statistical office. All statistical organizations should establish an issues management process to better prepare the organization to respond quickly and efficiently when an issue occurs. Communications should be factual, transparent, accountable, and accessible to all stakeholders. Issues management protocols should be tested and lessons learned from the testing and implementation of the process should be used to enhance further the organizations' preparedness for effective response.

The document is presented to the Conference of European Statisticians' seminar on "Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication", Session 2: "Communication crises - issue and reputation management" for discussion.

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I. Introduction

1. Sometimes things go wrong. All statistical organizations encounter challenging issues and unanticipated crises. The purpose of issue and crisis communications planning is to mitigate the procedural and reputational damage that adverse events may trigger by ensuring that statistical organizations are well prepared to respond to problems publicly in a timely and appropriate manner.

2. Challenging issues can originate from within or outside the statistical organization.

3. Internal issues could include the following:

- Statistical – estimation errors, methodological shortcomings;
- Corporate – corruption, conflict of interest, incompetence, unwise public statements by an employee (especially on social media);
- Continuity – system failures (e.g. website down);
- Security – confidentiality breaches.

4. External issues might include:

- Reputational attacks – allegations of bias, distortion, or "fake news";
- Political interference (real or perceived) – premature disclosure of data by political actors, pressure to change or reschedule releases, national or international political instability;
- Continuity – weather events, cyber-attack, bomb threat, fire, pandemic, violence in or near worksite;
- Statistical – stakeholders challenging data (e.g. different groups disagree with organization's figures.).

5. Most of these events will require coordinated responses from multiple areas within the statistical organization. Staff in information technology, statistical methods, administration and security, etc. may have very significant roles to play. In some cases, a continuity management team may exist with defined responsibilities. In all cases, however, corporate communications will be vital. The remainder of this paper will focus on the communications role in issue and crisis management.

II. Event and crisis communications principles

6. Consistent with general communications principles, during an event or crisis a statistical organization should:

- Communicate facts as quickly as possible;
- Provide updates as circumstances change;
- Ensure the safety of its community and the continued operation of essential services to its stakeholders.

7. The statistical organization should convey facts (what it knows) in a timely fashion using multiple forms of media. It should not speculate. Providing factual information is especially important in the first minutes, hours and days of a crisis. The goal is to be transparent, accountable, and accessible to all stakeholders, while respecting legal and privacy obligations.

8. One caution to keep in mind is using social media carefully. Social media can be an effective and efficient means to reach a broad audience rapidly with messages that support the management of an issue or crisis. On the other hand, trying to correct a falsehood on social media may be as likely to proliferate the falsehood, as it is to promote the correction.

III. Issue or crisis?

9. Not every situation is a crisis. Understanding the difference been an issue and a crisis is essential to response development. An issue could impact a program or project outcome. Issues can develop into crises. A crisis is a situation that needs to be addressed with urgency. It may threaten the long-term reputation of the organization, and may impede continuity of operations.

10. An issue can be identified when:

- The statistical organization's staff have adequate time to assess the situation, frame the issue, and implement solutions to reduce the adverse impact;
- All or most operations continue as normal;
- No injury, illness or death has occurred;
- A mid-level manager may be authorized to sign off on the response.

11. A crisis, by contrast:

- Requires an immediate response;
- Has the potential to interrupt or disable an organizations' operations;
- May include injury, illness or death;
- Requires personal intervention by the organization's top leadership;
- Involves multiple bodies, including media, stakeholders, staff, and partners.

12. A crisis will usually initiate a parallel set of processes within the organization that are far broader than communication, for example a continuity management plan.

13. Strategic issues management is structurally similar to crisis communications in that it follows the same general sequence of steps. However, there is usually more flexibility in developing a response, with more time to weigh options and determine appropriate and effective mitigating procedures. Table 1 provides an issue/crisis matrix.

Table 1
Issue/crisis matrix

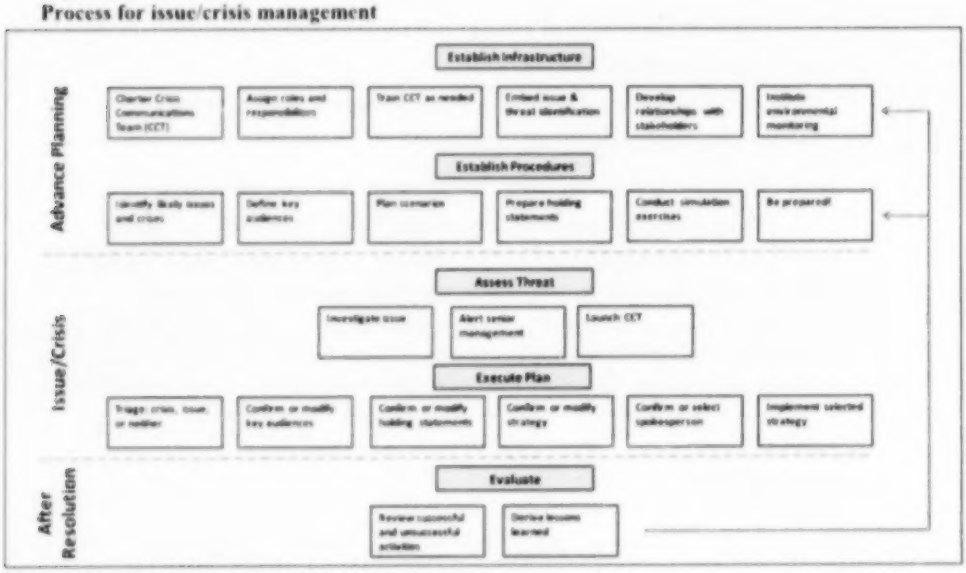
Impact	Timing	
	Now	In the future
High Threat to organisation's existence or long term reputation, likely high level of media, social media and political attention		**Advanced planning to prevent or mitigate, highest level of approvals, resource appropriately, inform key stakeholders, monitor regularly.**

Impact	Timing	
	Now	In the future
Medium Threat to short term reputation, likely medium level attention	**Immediate action and high-level approval required.**	Action plan to prevent or mitigate, approval levels to be determined, monitor
Low Not a threat to reputation, only certain groups interested	Decide whether to act or not. Local level action.	Plan to prevent or mitigate issue. Local level action.

IV. Managing issues

14. This section describes a process to manage issues and crises using a strategic, planned and controlled approach. Figure 1 shows the process flow of this procedure.

Figure 1
Process for issue/crisis management



A. Phase 1 – Advance planning

15. The purpose of advance planning is to define a process, assign responsibilities, obtain management buy-in, and prepare draft responses, or "holding statements", to be used in the event of an issue or crisis.

16. The procedure for advance planning begins with establishing the organizational infrastructure necessary to respond rapidly, with full organizational authority:

- Charter a crisis communications team composed of senior personnel:
  - Collect contact information;
  - Establish ground rules (quorum, decision-making process);
  - Determine communications (e.g. teleconference, in-person meetings, etc.);
  - Assign roles and responsibilities;
  - Train members of the crisis communications team, as needed.

Figure 2
Examples of crisis communications roles and team membership

Example: Crisis communications roles

- The Executive Oversight Board strategically plans the crisis communications policy.
- The crisis communications team (CCT) determines and enacts the communications tactics best suited to the crisis situation. Additional members may be called upon when deemed necessary by the core CCT.
- The management in charge of the area that is involved in the situation that brought about the crisis resolves the situation and keeps the CCT informed. The Senior Executive for the affected program or designee (if program-specific) joins the CCT for the duration of the crisis.

Example: Crisis communications team membership

The team will consist of senior management officials. At a minimum, the core team will include:

- Head of Statistical Organization
- Deputy Head of Statistical Organization
- Director of Public Affairs
- Senior Executive for Communications or designee
- Senior Executive for Administration or designee

Additional members may be called upon when deemed necessary by the core CCT.

- Embed threat identification within the organizational structure:
  - Institute a corporate culture where staff at all levels are alert to potential issues and crises, and know how to report suspected threats;
- Develop relationships with external stakeholder networks so that they, too, are encouraged to identify threats and notify the statistical organization;
- Institute environmental monitoring (e.g. traditional media and social media tracking).

17. The second phase of advance planning involves thinking ahead to potential threats and determining optimal reactions:

- Identify likely issues and crises[1];

[1] There is overlap between issue and crisis communications and risk management (see https://statswiki.unece.org/display/GORM/Risk+Management). In particular, the risk assessment process includes identification, analysis and measurement, and weighting (risk prioritization). Risk identification feeds into the communications planning by identifying likely issues and crisis; issue and crisis communications, in turn, feeds into risk analysis and weighting.

- Define key audiences;
- Plan scenarios;
- Preparing holding statements;
- Conduct simulation exercises (e.g. table top run-throughs);
- Integrate lessons learned from previous issues and crises;
- Be prepared. Accepting the inevitability of crises. Practice responses until they become ingrained.

Figure 3.
Example of a holding statement

Example: Holding statement

At **(X:00 PM/AM date)**, the **Statistical Organization** announced that data from the **(date and name)** news release that was scheduled for release on **(time and date)** were inadvertently released from the website. The release can be found here: **(link)**.

18. To be successful, this phase needs to be detailed, comprehensive, and demands buy-in from the highest level of the statistical organization.

B. Phase 2 – Issue and crisis communications execution

19. The purpose of this phase is to manage efficiently and effectively a live issue or crisis.

20. When a potential issue has been identified and reported, the communications manager must:

- Quickly investigate the issue;
- Alert senior management;
- Launch the issue or crisis communications group.

21. The role of the issue or crisis communications group is to:

- Assess the issue;
- Decide if it is an issue or a crisis;
- Decide if a proactive or reactive approach is required, or if no communication at all is merited;
- Confirm or tailor key audiences;
- Confirm or tailor holding statements;
- Confirm or tailor the desired approach (e.g. what channels);
- Confirm or select spokesperson(s);
- Implement the selected strategy.

22. Key to the success of this phase is that the process is efficient, effective, and includes timely decision-making.

C. Phase 3 – Evaluation

23. The final stage, after an issue or crisis has been weathered, is to evaluate the effectiveness of the communications process, and use the results to inform future planning phases. The review process should take place promptly to ensure that the lessons learned are fresh and comprehensive.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

24. Effective issues/crisis management is critical to protect and maintain the reputation of a statistical office. All statistical organizations should establish an issue management process to better prepare the organization to respond quickly and efficiently when an issue occurs. Issue management protocols should be tested and lessons learned from the testing and implementation of the process should be used to enhance further the organizations' preparedness for effective response.

25. This document has described the initial thinking of the HLG-MOS Strategic Communication Project. The Project is continuing with its plan of work this year to provide further support for statistical organizations in the development of their respective issues management protocols.